

MANUFACTURING EXTENSION PARTNERSHIP

Success Stories from the Field

Thomas Enterprises

Iowa Manufacturing Extension Partnership

Family Business Upgrades Racing Hardware

Client Profile:

Thomas Enterprises, located in Anamosa, Iowa, manufactures controllers for use with racing simulation software. These controllers are commonly used by race car drivers, including Dale Earnhardt Jr. and Ryan Newman, as practice tools. Dave Thomas Sr., president of Thomas Enterprises, has been racing since high school, and involved in simulated racing since 1992. He decided to start his company after observing a general lack of quality in the plastic-based wheels that dominated the market. Thomas Enterprises consists primarily of Thomas Sr., wife Julie, and son Thomas Jr., yet the family manufactures almost everything required for their products on-site. "The only thing we actually farm out is the molding of the plastic covers for our most popular units," said Thomas Sr. "Everything else we do ourselves." This hands-on approach has led to great success; the company earned \$400,000 in sales in 2002.

Situation:

Dave Thomas Jr., vice president of Thomas Enterprises, found that they needed to upgrade their controllers to contain USB ports, now the predominant technology in PCs. "We had an intermediate solution," said Dave. "We had an adapter that would convert our normal connection over to the USB connection. It had some issues." The company came to the Iowa Manufacturing Extension Partnership (IMEP), a NIST MEP network affiliate, which recommended CIRAS for assistance in changing the interface.

Solution:

The conversion took about five months to complete, and other enhancements were added as well. "We used an off-the-shelf microcontroller that's built to automatically interface with USB," said Andrew Bice, CIRAS' industrial specialist funded by IMEP. "We also improved their precision on the steering wheel and gas pedals, and gave them the capability to add more buttons." The upgrades saved the Thomas business. Thomas also plans to expand the capabilities of the controllers now that they are up to speed with current technology.

Results:

- * Increased sales.
- * Improved capabilities of controllers expected.
- * Improved product.

Testimonial:

"It really put our controllers back as the number one option for the die-hard gamers out there. Our word of mouth publicity has improved significantly, and we offer an upgrade service for people who have had our wheels with the older type of wiring. That's really improved our sales."

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Dave Thomas, Jr., Vice President